

I JUST CAN'T REMEMBER

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HE VETERAN recalls the beauty of a South Pacific lagoon, with its deep blues, pale greens, and its coral lurking just beneath the surface. The litterateur sighs with pleasure as he recalls a line of Shakespeare. In the hush of her cell the nun smiles to herself as she meditates and savors again a heartening line of Scripture. All are enjoying the power of memory, an amazing power, so amazing that St. Augustine wondered how people could be excited about wonders outside them when they held such a wonderful power within them.

Wonderful it is, but when Johnny in his college history class just can't recall names, dates and other data he is apt to be irked by this failure. This will hold true despite the fact that memory is a treasure house that contains hidden within it things he has experienced. He may perhaps wonder in a vague, ineffectual way, if something can't be done to expedite the finding of what his memory holds. It can.

Of course it is true that the aptitude for good remembrance of data is found in one person, while it is found to a much lesser degree in another. Nor is it commonly thought that the power had from nature can in itself be improved. Yet art and care in the use of this power can greatly improve the quality of its performance. This is something Johnny's teacher might do well to remember when tempted to impatience at his forgetfulness.

Johnny may need a certain amount of prodding. Even as an exalted college man he needs memory exercises, old-fashioned but so necessary. Incidentally, it is a mistake of modern education to put too much emphasis on the acquisition of the mere soul of knowledge. If students are counselled just to understand what they study, without further being advised to commit the matter of their study to memory, they will find that their understanding will soon become an ephemeral sort of thing—something which will be recognized perhaps at the Socratic prompting of another. The student will find it is not something that is part of himself to the extent that he will be able to call it forth and express it precisely without external aid. Johnny then

needs memory drills, but he also needs guidance. Who could better guide him than the Patron of Schools himself?

St. Thomas would advise Johnny: "There are four things whereby a man perfects his memory. First, when a man wishes to remember a thing, he should take some suitable yet somewhat unwonted illustration of it, since the unwonted strikes us more, and so makes a greater and stronger impression on the mind; and this explains why we remember better what we saw when we were children. Now the reason for finding these illustrations or images, is that simple and spiritual impressions easily slip from the mind, unless they be tied as it were to some corporeal image, because human knowledge has a greater hold on sensible objects."¹

Teacher would do well then to teach Johnny to tie what he wishes to remember to some suitable example of the thing to be remembered. For instance, if Johnny is called upon to remember the four things needed before one can place an act which will have a double effect, the one effect good, the other evil, he would be wise to have a picture to aid him. A picture will make the matter more memorable as well as clear. The four requirements for the placing of such an act are that 1) the action itself be good or at least indifferent; 2) the good effect be immediate; 3) the intention of the doer be honest; 4) there be present a cause proportionately grave for placing such an act. To remember well those four requirements his teacher might give Johnny the illustration of a pilot ordering part of a cargo cast overboard during a storm in order that the people aboard his flying-boat be saved from a crash. The action involved in giving such an order is not in itself evil, as would be the order to cast overboard a number of the passengers. Thus the first requirement is met. The good effect, the lightening of the ship, is immediate. Hence the second requirement is fulfilled. The third requirement is met in that the end of the pilot is a good one. The danger to the lives of those in the flying-boat is certainly a cause proportionately grave enough to permit such an order and thus is fulfilled the fourth of the necessary requirements.

If Johnny understands the example, he should imagine the scene as vividly as possible. When at some later time he tries to recall the four requirements for an action involving a double effect he would do well to picture again the storm-tossed flying-boat and its worried pilot ordering the cargo jettisoned. His recall of the requirements for the pilot's act will then be aided, if not insured. As St. Thomas said, "human knowledge has a greater hold on sensible objects."

¹ S. Th. II-II, 49, 1.

For his second word of guidance, St. Thomas would say: "whatever a man wishes to retain in his memory he must carefully consider and set in order, so that he may easily pass from one object of memory to another. Hence the Philosopher says (*De Memoria et Reminiscentia*): Sometimes a place brings back memories to us: the reason being that we pass quickly from the one to the other."

Anyone who has read the *Summa Theologiae* of St. Thomas will be aware that he carefully considered the matter therein and then set it in order with consummate skill. This was done with a view to the learning and retention of his pupils. Usually there will be a natural order in matter that is studied. If there is not, an order can generally be artificially constructed.

In this regard it is noteworthy that great Dominican preachers, such as St. Albert and St. Vincent Ferrer, carefully put together their sermons, so that they would be easily remembered by their hearers. St. Vincent, for instance, has a sermon on the text: "Art thou only a stranger in Jerusalem?" (*Lu. 24, 18*). That one word "stranger" and the image St. Vincent made it evoke sums up the whole sermon. St. Vincent preached that Christ was a stranger in five ways: 1) as to His equipment; 2) as to the roads He traveled; 3) as to the inns He visited; 4) as to the dangers He sustained and 5) as to the tokens of travel He brought back with Him. Space does not permit of an explanation of all that the Angel of the Apocalypse included under each of those five points. Let us briefly consider the first point, namely Christ the stranger, as to His equipment. St. Vincent says the clothing Christ wore was the pure flesh He received from the Virgin Mary. The travel pouch He carried was His soul full of all that was good and holy. The hat He wore was the crown of thorns. The staff He carried was His holy cross. Of course the saint develops these ideas beautifully. That is not the point here and now. The point is that St. Vincent arranged his sermons so that they would be remembered.

In the sermon considered, St. Vincent, an ardent disciple of St. Thomas, may very well have consciously put into practice St. Thomas' first two rules for remembering well. In any case, the sermon illustrates those two rules. It gives the medieval imagination the picture of a traveler, one easily retained. It then is shrewdly ordered. A traveler would naturally first look to his equipment, next to the route to be followed, then to his stopping points and to the dangers likely to be met. Finally he might consider the tokens of travel he would carry back with him. That is just the order St. Vincent observed.

Having read this sermon, I recalled it one night and then won-

dered why I could so easily remember its contents. On analysis I found it was because my mind easily flowed from the image of a stranger into the five points of the sermon. The image of a stranger, as St. Vincent had pictured him, gave me the clues that recalled the sermon. It is not without reason that the Orientals say: "One picture is worth ten thousand words."

St. Thomas' next advice to Johnny would be that "we must be anxious and earnest about the things we wish to remember, because the more a thing is impressed on the mind, the less it is liable to slip out of it." Anyone who has persevered thus far in this article must be anxious to remember things. We shall assume then this quality of earnestness and anxiousness in the reader.

The Angelic Doctor fourthly would say to Johnny: "we should often reflect on the things we wish to remember. Hence the Philosopher says (*De Memoria*) that reflection preserves memories, because as he remarks (*ibid.*) custom is a second nature: wherefore when we reflect on a thing frequently, we quickly call it to mind, through passing from one thing to another by a kind of natural order." This will be evident to anyone who has quickly crammed and as quickly forgotten. We remember well what we often reflect on, during the course of a school year. The same can not be said of the mental food we bolt the night before an examination. We may remember it the next day, but hardly the next week. The wax of memory has not received the impress of reflection often enough for retention.

On the negative side, Johnny must be warned not to study beyond his fatigue limit. He should not study beyond his absorption rate, racing through matter and slurring details. He should avoid studying without intermittence, which does not allow his memory time to "harden," as Fr. Brennan's *Thomistic Psychology* makes clear.

Suppose Johnny has followed all the rules and still has forgotten. St. Thomas would tell him that he needs to reminisce, that is, seek that which has fallen out of his memory. That seeking can start from the present time, tracing back to arrive at something he did several days previously. Happenings are connected like links of a chain. In this sort of reminiscence one goes back from link to link until the forgotten link is reached. For instance, Johnny back at school after the summer vacation, may be wondering if he locked the summer house as his father ordered. If he simply can't recall, he would do well to go back over the links that had made up his life over the past few days till he reaches the forgotten happening. He might say to himself: "This morning I was very sleepy. That was because I sat up at a television show last night. Before the show we had a party.

I was late for the party because I had spent the afternoon ferreting out my books for the new school year. That was after late Mass which we had attended because we had had such a long drive from the country Saturday. We had been delayed along the road by a flat tire. We were also delayed in starting the trip. I remember that Dad was irritable and complained that it was bad enough to have to wait for mother all morning, but it was the last straw to have to wait while I searched through all my summer clothes for the house key. Oh, that's right. I did lock the house."

On the other hand the effort at remembering may proceed from something which is remembered, hoping thus to arrive at the thing that is not remembered. This procedure can be carried out in three ways. It may be by reason of *Similitude*, as snow suggests white. In the above illustration Johnny might remember it was a gloomy, overcast day that he left the country. The gloomy day might suggest the bad mood of his father and that recall the delay in departing and that the locking of the summer home. The procedure can be by way of *contrariety*, as black suggests white. Johnny may remember that mother was very cheerful about getting back to the city. That will suggest his father's black mood and Johnny will again be on the way to remembering that he locked the door. Finally, the procedure may be by reason of *propinquity or nearness*, whether the nearness be of society, of place or of time. Johnny may recall who was with him in the car that left his summer home. It was mother and dad. Dad was angry, and so once again Johnny is on the way to recalling the lost fact.

Beyond these counsels there are certain tricks that can be employed for remembering, but they are pretty much reducible to the principles outlined above. There is the well known mnemonic device of having letters represent ideas. For instance, I might tell Johnny to utilize order and pictures to remember well, and, lest he forget, tell him to remember O.P., O for order and P for pictures. This is remembering from a principle of the whole, the principle O.P. In terms of images the principle O.P. might be made concrete by picturing a particular Dominican to epitomize the O.P. which signifies order and pictures.

There is another device, less well known, but quite effective. It uses pictorial representations. It involves the formulation of a pictorial code. The pictures are memorized in order. Then, when new items are to be remembered, a code picture is envisioned with each of the objects to be remembered. The code can be coupled with numbers or the alphabet to obviate the difficulty of recalling which code

picture follows after the preceding one. For instance the letters A, B, C, D would have the code pictures, Able, Baker, Charley, Dog—Able the biblical Abel perhaps, Baker some baker you know, Charley some Charley you know, Dog some dog you may fear. Thus you might run through the alphabet and in short order you would have a code of twenty-six ordered pictures. You could then very quickly remember twenty-six things, however oddly assorted they might be. With material things to be remembered there is no difficulty. With spiritual ideas some ingenuity is needed. The spiritual ideas must be represented materially if they are to be held in the embrace of the code pictures. Thus a word like spirituality would have to be transformed into the image of a cherub, an idea like sensuality transformed into the image of a roué.

To show how this works, assume the fourth object of a number of objects memorized was the bible. In memorizing, Johnny would simply picture the fourth letter D or Dog with the fourth object, the bible, in its mouth. To recall the fourth object, Johnny would picture Dog again and with Dog would appear the bible.

Devices such as that described above are useful for people who do not have ready memorial powers. For those with good memories they are a waste of time, and a cluttering of the imagination. For people like Johnny they will help. Incidentally, a whole book has been written by a name named Roth dealing with the use of images in recollecting. It was published by The Sundial Press. I wish I knew the name of the book, but I just can't remember. . . .